

VIEW

Are the new media radically more independent?

Donald Matheson delves into the murky world of the warblogs and concludes that they can be subject to as much political control as traditional forms of journalism

The rhetoric of citizen journalism holds that blogs, content-sharing media such as YouTube and bridging media such as Current TV, bring fresh voices to a public debate made stale by a cowed or biased media. Enthusiasts, such as Bowman and Willis (2003: 220) argue that 'we media' are motivated by the desire 'to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires'. There are examples of all of this among citizen media, but there are also examples, some of them highly prominent ones, suggesting that such media are just as subject to political control as traditional forms of journalism. Independence from news media does not at all mean independence from power. More worrying still, in the context of the US's current foreign adventures, there are signs that a series of well-organised military and political campaigns to manage these media make it hard to identify at times who is independent from what.

Little investigation is needed for the stories of some of the more prominent citizen commentators on the US-led war in Iraq to become decidedly murky. Bill Roggio's *Long War Journal*, for example, appears to have links to organizations which have links to intelligence operations. In September 2007, Roggio, a former US soldier turned his widely read 'warblog' into a grander enterprise. *The Long War Journal* aimed, according to Roggio in an interview with the *Columbia Journalism Review*, to bring together a small team of individuals to report on terrorism, counter-terrorism and the world's many small wars with a detail that news organizations could not match. Roggio, his interviewer suggested, 'picks up where the mainstream press leaves off, giving readers a simultaneously more specific and holistic understanding of the battlefield' (McLeary 2008).

Public Multimedia Inc. the non-profit organization that Roggio founded to fund the

endeavour, states as its aim: 'Accurate reporting of The Long War is critical for the American citizenry and her allies to make choices in the important decisions that affect their lives' (Public Multimedia Incorporated 2007). This citizen journalist, along with the likes of US academic blogger Juan Cole or Canadian PR manager and blogger Bruce Rolston, is contributing a content-rich form of micro-media that has gained some authority in North American political and military circles.

Roggio makes no secret of his links to the military. He has been invited to visit Iraq as an independent embed with US troops on numerous occasions. He is also associated with the US Department of Defense 'Bloggers Roundtable' (on which more below). The 'long war' of his title is, moreover, a shorthand term used by members of the Bush Administration for the ideological war they perceive the US as fighting against Islamic extremism. The project clearly belongs on the right of the political spectrum. However, Roggio is less forthcoming on where the funding for his seven staff and the reporters he has hired on various assignments comes from, beyond saying he relies on donations from readers (McLeary 2008).

His website does, however, list one of the larger charities working in Iraq, Spirit of America (SoA), as one of four supporters. SoA, a charity distributing aid in Iraq, is linked by a number of commentators to covert operations of the US government. The left-wing blog 'Bush Out' notes that SoA was originally set up by the Cyber Century Forum, 'a group dedicated to spreading US influence worldwide, with a particular emphasis on covert cyber-intelligence measures' (Gandhi 2005). That organization in turn appears to have hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in Texas oil companies. Some of SoA's activities suggest it is involved in much more than aid. It has provided computers, Internet connections and its own Arabic blog software to selected Iraqis.

Much more than propaganda

It is hard to pin anything on Roggio – though his lack of candour about funding for his project raises questions – and his site provides detailed analysis of military strategy that is much more than propaganda. But elsewhere SoA appears to have clearly politicised aims in the online initiatives it backs. The radical magazine *Counterpunch* notes its recent support for protestors against the pro-Syrian government in Lebanon, including both money and facilitating the setting up of a large number of citizen

blogs. It labels SoA part of the 'regime change industry' (Schuh 2005).

Also linked to SoA are two prominent English-language bloggers in Iraq, the Fadhil brothers, who run 'Iraq the Model'. The organization flew them to Washington in 2004, where they were fêted by President Bush and other senior Republican politicians. Spirit of America also provided the bloggers with, according to a third Fadhil who acrimoniously parted company with his brothers, \$300,000, presumably in payment for their pro-US blogging (Gandhi, 2007). Another blogger, on the basis of parallels in phrasing, accused the brothers of publishing under their name propaganda written in the US State Department's 'public diplomacy' office (JuliaAnn 2007). Again, it should be noted that the Fadhil brothers may receive support from neo-conservative group in the US without necessarily writing for money or expressing other than their own views.

But the suspicions of left-wing critics are reinforced by evidence that the US and UK governments are both active in parts of the blogosphere. Some parts of this activity are openly acknowledged. The US State Department, for example, began employing Arabic and English-language bloggers as part of its Digital Outreach Team in 2006. The *New York Times* reported that in their first nine months two Arabic staff had posted comments on 70 websites, with the aim of reaching 'the silent majority of Muslims who might sympathize with Al Qaeda yet be open to information about US government policy and American values' (McFarquhar 2007). It planned – and we can assume the plans were carried out – to employ a further seven bloggers to contribute in Arab, Farsi and Pakistani blogs and discussion sites, all working on the basis that they openly declared their affiliation when blogging, yet with the hope that their more casual style would have greater impact than officials saying the same things. The blog comments were, in the words of the newspaper report:

carefully written in English by the blogging team and then translated into often poetic Arabic. 'We try to put ourselves in the mindset of someone receiving the message,' said Duncan MacInnes, the director of the Counterterrorism Communication Center, of which the bloggers are a part. 'Freedom for an Arab doesn't necessarily have the same meaning it has for an American. Honor does. So we might say terrorism is dishonorable, which resonates more.'

Another initiative from the same office is the Bloggers' Roundtable, a series of conference calls where invited bloggers can speak with Pentagon officials about current issues. *Sourcewatch* cites a *Washington Post* article in which the director of new media operations at the US Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Roxie Merritt, explained that 'while bloggers aren't being credentialed like media, the military is taking more time to communicate with bloggers to ensure that they post accurate information' (*Sourcewatch* 2008; citing Schwab 2007). In practice, according to an article in *Harper's Magazine*, the initiative is more about seeking 'to bypass the mainstream by working directly with a carefully culled list of military analysts, bloggers, and others who can be counted on to parrot the Bush Administration line on national security issues' (Silverstein 2007).

At about the same time, other ways of intervening in the blogosphere were being talked about in military and political circles. *Wired* magazine reports that in 2006 an academic at the Naval Postgraduate School proposed clandestinely recruiting bloggers. 'Hiring a block of bloggers to verbally attack a specific person or promote a specific message may be worth considering' (Denning, cited in Schactman, 2008). A Special Operations Command spokesperson distanced the military from this 'academic exercise'. Denning also suggested hacking into 'enemy blogs' and changing details to undermine their credibility or even cause their authors to be regarded as traitors and 'taken down' by the enemy. Schulman (2006) provides evidence that the later abandoned Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) was set up in 2001 with the aim of using the Internet as part of US psychological operations. He cited a report by its director, Simon 'Pete' Worden, which proposed a range of propaganda tactics from the blatant – free music downloads or pornography to attract young Muslim men to websites carrying pro-US messages – to the more subtle:

Discrediting extremist groups among foreign populations, Worden realized, would take 'respected authorities such as journalists, clerics and artists within that group to denounce' them. But 'simply paying them to do so is likely to boomerang,' he believed: 'Even if some can be so induced, the likely exposure of such tactics will do more to discredit our objectives than any gain achieved.' Therefore, 'a subtle mesh of inducements and disincents must be developed. At the outset, we may offer free or increased access to the

increasingly high technology means of communication...to moderate voices' (Schulman 2006: 42).

Schulman argues that while the OSI was soon disbanded in 2002 under protest that its activities might include planting untrue stories in foreign media, it disappeared only in name – as, indeed, then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated publicly.

MoD closes down blogs

In the UK, there is less evidence of use of blogs as covert propaganda. However, the Ministry of Defence has closed down a number of blogs and proposed controlled spaces for soldiers to stay in contact with families and share their opinions. At the same time as issuing a nearly unworkable ban on any communication by military personnel on 'issues arising from an individual's official business or experience', the Ministry's Director General of Communications, Simon McDowell, told the *Guardian* that 'the MoD was experimenting with authorized blogs from Afghanistan...[and] was also seeking "legitimate outlets for people to express themselves"' (Gillan 2007).

These initiatives come as no surprise. As new media emerge, they will become the targets of those in the political and military who have specialized in managing existing media. As well as restricting letter-writing, the military now seeks to manage soldiers' blogs and emails. As well as managing journalists, the communication experts within the military and political institutions now seek to do much the same with bloggers and users of other social software forms which have risen so rapidly to prominence as places of political debate in recent years.

Moreover, these new propaganda initiatives are an understandable response to wider changes in the context for war. Non-state groups engaged in asymmetrical warfare with the US and other militaries have themselves made well-organised use of digital communications technologies in their fighting. Subcommandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatistas in the Mexican state of Chiapas, spoke of disrupting state power through publicity as much as violence: 'We did not go to war on January 1 [1994] to kill or to have them killed. We went to make ourselves heard' (cited in Gray 1997: 6). The Al Zawra satellite television station, beamed into Iraq through NileSat, was credited by some commentators with feeding the Iraqi Sunni rebellion from 2004

onwards, through its repeated showing of images of grenades and roadside bombs targeting US facilities and convoys gleaned from the Internet (Howard 2007).

Klopfenstein (2006) adds that terrorism, or the act of achieving political aims by highly public acts of violence aimed at civilians, has become much more efficient through the Internet. Rather than create terrifying spectacles in the hope that news media will amplify their effect, in the process losing control over the way their aims are represented, 'terrorists can take whatever message and images they decide to use straight to the online world, and that world is global in reach...This is a dramatic change in the context of terrorism that has accelerated only in the last five years' (ibid: 108). The dramatic images of the execution of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Danny Pearl are widely cited as an example of this 'terrorist Internet'.

But for those concerned about the health of civil society, these changes in warfare, propaganda and political control should be of concern. They suggest, for one thing, that the most powerful countries in the world have pushed the boundaries of public opinion management out significantly further than before – at least since the depths of the Cold War. Parallels with totalitarianism are perhaps overblown, but when there is strategic value for large governments in targeting individuals and personal forms of communication such as blogs, the spaces of independent thinking become steadily more constricted. This is a matter for particular worry when the political management of these depends upon them being perceived as independent, because then there is considerable incentive to manage them covertly.

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